

Interview with Allan L. Kohlmeier

Interview by Gregory Nelson

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Nelson: Mr. Kohlmeier is 58 years old, having been born April 22, 1945. I've known Mr. Kohlmeier since 1962 when we were both students at St. Joseph High School in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Al, please tell us what branch of the military did you serve in?

Kohlmeier: I served in the Army, the United States Army.

Nelson: And, what was the highest rank you achieved?

Kohlmeier: Specialist 4, which is the same as a corporal. A corporal has two stripes to start out with, one stripe a private.

Nelson: What war did you serve in?

Kohlmeier: I served in the Vietnam War.

Nelson: When you were drafted in 1965 you incurred a six-year military obligation, two years active, four years reserve, your discharge documents indicate that you served one year, ten months and seven days on active duty from 5 October, 1965, to 11 August, 1967, the remainder of your six year obligation was spent in the USAR Control Group out of St. Louis, Missouri. Where did you enter the US Army?

Kohlmeier: We entered in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Nelson: At the MEP station?

Kohlmeier: Yes.

Nelson: MEP stands for Military Entrance Processing station. Where did you attend your basic training? [[Note: at the time, 1965, it was Armed Forces Entrance Examination Station AFEES. MEP name change occurred later.]]

Kohlmeier: We went to Fort Knox, Kentucky, and we transferred from Milwaukee by train to that location. It took a day or so to get there, about a day and part of another day.

Nelson: Tell me about your boot camp training.

Kohlmeier: I enjoyed it. I was in very good physical shape before I went into the service. I worked out on the high bar, I worked out on the parallel bars, and doing push-ups and free weights and that, so I was really in pretty good shape. So, I enjoyed it. The

guys who were not in good shape did have trouble, they struggled through it. They gave you a lot of push-ups and things to do that harassed you, they tried to get you to conform to the thinking as a group rather than individually. We had a lot of calisthenics we did, we did rifle shooting which was interesting. We went out on a rifle range at different times and shot at targets that would pop up in front of you then go down and reported every hit or miss that you did and that's how you got your award for sharpshooter or expert or whatever.

Nelson: After your basic training you were fortunate enough to come home for awhile before you went on to your advanced individual training. I want to show you a couple of pictures here. Tell me about this picture on the screen here.

Kohlmeier: I was 20 years old there, I just came out of basic training. My dad was a professional photographer, he took weddings on weekends and so forth. A lot of people know him in Kenosha because of that. The studio was right in our own home. The weddings and so forth were taken against a large set of drapes in the house. The first picture you just had up there was taken against a wall in our front room, also the studio. This one here he took right at the barracks from basic training at graduation time.

Nelson: Oh, so this was taken at Fort Knox?

Kohlmeier: Yes. He actually brought my car down there which I stored at home and then drove it down and drove me back.

Nelson: After basic training, where did you go for your advanced individual training?

Kohlmeier: Fort Bragg, North Carolina, was where I went for my advanced training.

Nelson: What was your military occupational specialty, and why did you select that?

Kohlmeier: I really didn't select it. Because of all these different tests they gave you in the first few days you were in the service, they kept track and records of everything how well you did on all these different tests you took. I obviously scored very well in driving. Other ones that did well even in basic training at marksmanship that shot very well, the expert award they received, they went into usually...

Nelson: Infantry?

Kohlmeier: Infantry, yep. I obviously scored very high in truck driving, in the laws and so forth of truck driving.

Nelson: Were you surprised that they trained you as a driver?

Kohlmeier: I was because I had lost my driver's license prior to going into the service. In fact I lost it for three years because I had a lead foot, in fact I was a young teenager at the time and just before I came in the service they had taken it away for a three year period, so I was surprised. I even told them, I said you don't want me to be a driver, they said no, it doesn't matter what you did in civilian life, we are going to make you a truck driver.

Nelson: You were training as a 64 Alpha 10 which is a light vehicle driver. Tell me about the training you received at AIT, and what vehicles did you train on?

Kohlmeier: They trained us on a 2 ½ ton truck a little bit. We basically, the tests that we took we basically drove around the block as someone sat next to us and Xed off everything that we were supposed to do. We didn't have to parallel park or anything like that like a normal driving test, but we'd go around the block, check everything off and then we were truck drivers. Consequently they gave us other vehicles to drive also. I was driving jeeps, I was driving...

Nelson: You still have you original military driver's license. Pull that out and read what vehicles you were...

Kohlmeier: I was licensed to drive five- and nine-passenger autos, truck utilities, ¼ tons, truck communications, ½ tons, 1 ½ tons, and 2 ½ tons. Truck cargo which we drove most of the time was ¾ or 2 ½ ton trucks. I was also qualified to drive a twelve-, a twenty-, or a forty-five-passenger bus that we drove. I drove busses for awhile. We actually picked up Vietnam Veterans coming back from the war that were at the airport and we hauled them over to the hospital where they...

Nelson: And, that was you were picking up at Pope Air Force Base and then taking them to the Fort Bragg hospital?

Kohlmeier: Right.

Nelson: Well, just curious, because I drove vehicles in the military, too, and I had to know something about them to perform elementary maintenance. Do you know anything about the maintenance of those vehicles?

Kohlmeier: They brought you out and showed you know to check the oil, very basic things because they had their own mechanics that kept up the trucks, but it was very basic, didn't have to do much.

Nelson: In August of 1966, your entire [24th Transportation?] company went to Vietnam. How did you and your company get there?

Kohlmeier: We traveled I think it was by train to the California coast, that's where we shipped out in a large ship that carried 5,000, it was like 2,500 Army people, and at least 2,500 Marine people, and we all were on the same ship that was, it was a 30-day trip to get to Vietnam. It was very interesting because there was many, many lines, and you always had to ask what was this line for, that line for, because some of them were going to the PX, some of the guys were going to chow, and some of them were going to the show, and so it was interesting. We didn't pull much duty on the ship. I know I didn't, I mostly played cards with the same group of fellas almost the whole time we traveled over there. We always had nice weather, we traveled past Hawaii at one point, we didn't land, though. I was hoping we could have landed. I was an interesting trip over there.

Nelson: How did you feel about going to Vietnam? This was 1966, Johnson had called for large troop increases in the spring of 1965, so things were heating up over there. Were you apprehensive? How did you feel about going to Vietnam?

Kohlmeier: No. I wasn't, I was anxious to go to Vietnam. They had asked several times before the whole company went over any volunteers to go and I said yes, I would like to volunteer. I volunteered two or three times before actually the whole company went as a group. I kind of wanted to get out of the United States because of the little things that they were making you shine your shoes all the time, button your shirt, aw, it was just nit-picky little things, so I was glad to go to Vietnam. I had no fear of it. I didn't worry about it at all.

Nelson: Tell us when you arrived in Vietnam what did you come in to?

Kohlmeier: I came into Cam Ranh Bay. It was a very safe area. This was an area where the troops that were in-country took which was called an R&R, which was rest and recuperation time, and they would come there to recuperate. You heard no shells going off or explosions of any sort. It was a very large base. We were kind of on the outskirts of it when we first got there. We were in smaller tents, these are obviously barracks you see in this picture. We were there only for about a week and a half. We knew we weren't going to stay there permanently. We were waiting to go to our permanent location in Vietnam.

Nelson: Cam Ranh Bay was a very important port there, it's a large seaport, so most of your supplies were coming in there, a lot of the troops were coming in there. And, also I understand they had an airport there, too, so it was very important.

Kohlmeier: When we first came in because we traveled by ship and landed by ship we didn't see the airport when we first got there, but there was an airport.

Nelson: What unit were you assigned to, and what was your duty position?

Kohlmeier: 24th Transportation was the outfit that we were with.

Nelson: You were still a light vehicle driver then?

Kohlmeier: At the time, yes, but when you first got in the service one bit of advice that everyone gave you is not to volunteer for anything. Well, I said I'm in here for two years, I'm going to volunteer for whatever, so whenever they asked for a volunteer, I was the first one to raise my hand. I got excellent jobs, it was very little time I spent truck driving, the rest of the time I was doing multiple jobs. I really enjoyed it, I learned a lot, even in the States before I went to Vietnam I volunteered for many things, I learned at many different jobs.

Nelson: Just aside here, what were some of things that you volunteered for that you became, that you did actually?

Kohlmeier: I volunteered for carpenter work and I was building these type of wooden barracks in our permanent location where we moved, I was company repairman, I also started cutting, I was a barber, so I was company barber for many months, also ran a beer and soda tent for many months, also, that I sold to the fellas that came off the road that were truck drivers, I actually had to get up in the middle of the night and serve to the guys who came off the night shift at 12 o'clock every night.

Nelson: You sound like a very important person that probably kept you off the duty roster a lot, too.

Kohlmeier: It did, actually, in the whole time I was in Vietnam I pulled guard duty only one time which I was unqualified to do that because of the experience of going it one time, I didn't even have to make my own bed because I was a jump from that, I didn't even have to make reveille in the morning, I was a jump from that, I didn't have to do the nasty jobs. One of the nasty jobs, which one of the nasty jobs was, because we had outhouses out there and they were short like a cut-off 50 gallon drum which we had to

pull out at the end of the day and throw kerosene in it and burn it and it created this black smoke, that was one of the nastiest jobs. The fellas that usually were in trouble had this job, so I was a jump from that. There were many jobs I really got out of almost every job.

Nelson: Tell me about your unit, for instance how many personnel did you have, and what was your unit mission?

Kohlmeier: The company was comprised of 168 fellas. We were actually in our permanent location. Our duty was to go down to the base, this is a picture of our permanent location. We were near the village of (inaudible). This was the beach or the port where the large ships came in and unloaded, our trucks were mostly, this picture right here, were 2 ½ ton truck. This happened to be loaded with lumber here, which we were using to build the barracks. But, some of the trucks actually went out on a pier to offload the ships directly onto the 2 ½ ton trucks. Then these trucks would deliver the products or the supplies inland to where ever they were going.

Nelson: Did you have armed escorts on these convoys?

Kohlmeier: No, you just drove a number of trucks that traveled together for safety is all.

Nelson: You were on one of the convoys at one time, did you have your firearms, your personal weapons with you?

Kohlmeier: Actually, no. We didn't even have our firearms at that point. We did not carry them. There might have been way up in front of us might have been one jeep that was ahead of the convoy and they might have had firearms. We all traveled two people in each truck. It was interesting to get on this one convoy that I went on, it was interesting.

Nelson: Tell me how was your camp laid out?

Kohlmeier: The camp was long rows of uniform tents. There were sandbags that came up about three feet off the ground that surrounded each tent. We actually always walked in sand, we were on the beach so we were always on the sand. The tents were damp due to monsoon season, it rained for almost a month straight so the monsoon season, everything felt damp, your clothes, everything, even though they really weren't wet but they felt that way. It actually got down to 70 degrees during the monsoon season and the fellas wore their heaviest jacket at this time which really surprising because most of the

time it was over 100 degrees, it was such a change they thought it was wintertime at that time.

Nelson: What measure did your camp take for security?

Kohlmeier: We had the barbed wire all the way around the compound which we were right on the ocean so it just covered around the land area. Every so many feet there was a guard post where the guard would be stationed at night, and there was always these two guards there at night. There really weren't during the day, we didn't have guards in the post then.

Nelson: You pulled guard duty one time?

Kohlmeier: One time.

Nelson: What kind of weapons did they give you for defense?

Kohlmeier: We had the M14 at the time.

Nelson: Didn't have any light machine guns? Just your rifle?

Kohlmeier: No. That was the only time that I had really a use of my rifle when I was over there. I was a jump from even using my rifle except for that one time I pulled guard duty. When you pull guard duty you were on an hour and off an hour, and they had a real small Army cot in that little building there, and you slept for an hour and rotated.

Nelson: Was your camp ever attacked?

Kohlmeier: No. We had shells going overhead all the time and lots of tracers. It could have been a lot of friendly fire, too, but it was constant explosions and noise all the time, helicopters going over constantly so it was never quiet. We had jets swooping down because we had nearby mountains. They were dropping Napalm into the mountains trying to knock out the Viet Cong that were supposed been buried into the rock and so forth. It was noisy, but we never felt threatened. We went about our business and did whatever we had to.

Nelson: What other military units were at your camp?

Kohlmeier: We had two other companies, they were about the same number of guys that we were. We didn't mingle with them a lot, and we really didn't get to know them because we kept within ourselves,

Nelson: Were they transportation companies like you?

Kohlmeier: Yes, they were transportation also.

Nelson: While you were over there in Vietnam did you see any combat?

Kohlmeier: Not really.

Nelson: No actual fighting.

Kohlmeier: No, we didn't see any other than the jets coming down and dropping Napalm.

Nelson: Did your unit suffer many casualties in the year you were there?

Kohlmeier: We lost one man, he was a younger fella, he was driving down, the road over there were thin dirt roads full of ruts, him and the sergeant that he was driving for were going down early evening and the Viet Cong threw a hand grenade underneath the jeep. The jeep kind of flipped over on its side and when it did they peppered them from both sides, the older sergeant was hit six times and he ended up going back to the States and never came back because this was like halfway through our tour. The younger fella was killed.

Nelson: The slide we have up there now, this is a picture of a 2 ½ ton truck it looks like, that what, hit a mine, didn't it?

Kohlmeier: Right. This particular truck was about, the one convoy I went on, that truck was about three trucks in front of me and it hit one of the land mines. They put the land mines out at night and our trucks hit them, different times, not often, but they hit them. They usually hit the back tires and it would blow out the back of the truck. But, this one hit the front of the truck where the front wheel, the explosion came up through the floorboard, the driver was a friend of mine, it took the inside of his left leg off, it also took the inside of his left arm off, the left side of his face was taken off. He was lying on the ground screaming I can't see, I can't see. He later went back to the States, and he wrote to us and said the worst part was his arm, and he had like eleven operations to get his arm back in shape. And, he lost his eye he said, too, and the side of his face. But, normally, like I said, most of the time the trucks hit them with the back tires, it just kind of blew up the back end, what supplies were in it were scattered all over the place. One thing they always did they'd drag these trucks back to our compound and use them for spare parts. They kept them.

Nelson: What was the nearest town to your base?

Kohlmeier: The village of (inaudible) was probably about four miles away from us, and this was it here. You were allowed to go there on your days off, and they'd give us days off. In fact they supplied a truck to drive us there. I used to go in, it was a long, narrow street with many little stores on each side, and you could purchase virtually anything, clothing, whatever you wanted. You bartered with them for the price.

Nelson: There weren't fixed prices?

Kohlmeier: No. You had to watch the clothing because all the clothing was small sizes compared to what it said on it. The people were interesting to deal with, and there was livestock running all over loose on the streets, there were pigs running all over.

Nelson: Were they basically friendly, the people?

Kohlmeier: Oh, yeah, people were very friendly, the thing is, you didn't know if they were friend or foe when we traveled on these dirt roads from our camp because during the day they'd wave at us all the time, the kids would wave, and the people would wave, but at night they'd shoot at us from the same area, so. You didn't know if they were friend or foe, so you always had to be careful.

Nelson: I noticed from the slide there it seems like their main means of transportation was bicycle or motor scooter.

Kohlmeier: Yes, they had a lot of bicycles and little motor scooters, and they had little, they were like mini busses and they were always jammed with people. They were, you'd never see a vehicle that could hold four people with two empty seats. They were always full, amazing how they packed all these people in these little vehicles.

Nelson: Tell me about the living conditions in camp. What was it like?

Kohlmeier: We started out with tents, and halfway through our tour I volunteered to build barracks. I never had really much carpenter training, but I pretty well caught on to it fast. The Army Engineers had already built one of these wooden barracks near for one of the other companies, and I was told just go over and look how that one was built was come on back and build ours. The cement form was already poured, the cement slab, so I basically built it was a like a long garage with an A frame on it, and built those for the last four or five months we were over there.

Nelson: Can you identify that soldier?

Kohlmeier: Yeah, that was myself sitting in one of the tents there.

Nelson: 1966?

Kohlmeier: 1966, yes. This was a tent that housed our washing machines. Most of the guys did their own laundry. You had the option, you could take it to the Vietnamese and they washed it virtually in the mud ponds around the place, so I didn't really want to participate in that. Yet they came back, when the guys that did take their laundry to the Vietnamese, it came back neatly folded and it looked clean, but I still chose to use these kind of old washing machine with the wringer still on them.

Nelson: What's that, the camp shower point?

Kohlmeier: That is our shower, yes, which is a tanker, you can't see it from there, they'd fill the tank up whenever it went dry, but it was basically cool water you took showers in. It was a community shower, you didn't have any private stalls or anything. The Army Engineers also built this building. It was one of the buildings I did not build, it was built, although I helped fill it every once in awhile and whatever. This was our, in the compound, this is where all the trucks were parked. You can see the round tent, that's where they actually serviced the trucks off, all the mechanics, and they were kept busy. We had an area even for fixing flat tires, whatever they had to do, they had to do it right there and salvage the parts off of whatever damaged trucks they could.

Nelson: That camp seems quite large looking at it from the picture.

Kohlmeier: Yes, it was very well laid out, in fact it took us even to get up to the mess hall, it took us quite awhile to walk through all this sand to get there, and where ever you went it took twice as long because when you walk through sand with your Army combat boots on it's a little hard to get through it, it builds up your leg muscles.

Nelson: You indicated that you were the camp carpenter and that you constructed wooden barracks, what were they like?

Kohlmeier: They were just like a long garage, and all two-by-four framing. The first one I put up actually by myself. Here's the inside of one you can see. It had corrugated steel for roofing, right here, a picture of me putting down this corrugated roofing which I came up with a device that bent in the middle and then over flapped both sides. It was fun.

Nelson: You were in charge of the crew that built these, how many people did you have working for you?

Kohlmeier: Like I said, the first one I built myself, I had one fella to help me then, then they had seen that it looked good, and they gave me four or five other guys, plus they gave me some Vietnamese people to help me, also. These were some of the Vietnamese people that they brought their own hand tools, was a little hard to understand them, we communicated by mostly hand signals and whatever we wanted done. They'd come around not every day, and I'm sure the government had something set up where they got some kind of a pay, although we gave them fruits and oranges and whatever and they really enjoyed that when they worked for us. They seemed to work extra hard when you gave them a piece of fruit.

Nelson: You were concerned about the security risk here. I've got to assume that the military or the powers there that hired these people did some kind of security check on them.

Kohlmeier: I would think so, too, and I think they were checked when they came in to the compound not to have any weapons of any sort. I never thought too much about it. I assumed they were okay, and they seemed to be happy all the time.

Nelson: Good workers?

Kohlmeier: Yes, good workers.

Nelson: Did you stay in touch with your family while you were in Vietnam, and how did you do that?

Kohlmeier: I wrote a lot. I had a girlfriend at the time and I wrote her and she wrote me back. We also communicated by these small, reel-to-reel tapes. They were very inexpensive tape recorders, and almost everybody had them. We'd record our voices and then send those through the mail, and they'd record maybe even over the same ones and send them back to us, the way we communicated.

Nelson: What was the food like in Vietnam, and did you sample any of the local food or soft drinks?

Kohlmeier: The food was very good. It was actually better than in the States, you could actually go back for seconds. When a shipload of a certain product came in, like apples for instance, we'd have apples for a straight month at every meal. Watermelons came in at one point, we had to have watermelons at every meal. But, the food was very good, we never went hungry. I did not sample the Vietnamese food, it was almost like Mexican

food on shells and so forth, soft shells and that, and I did not try any of their food. They did offer me food at different times, but I rejected because they were so poor, also, I really didn't want to take their food away from them, they looked like they had just enough for themselves, so I always rejected it.

Nelson: Their soft drinks were in bottles. Where they okay to drink?

Kohlmeier: No, I avoided that because I had seen them where they'd sell coke bottles or beer to other fellas that were there, and at the end when they left they'd take these bottles and drain them all back into one and recap it and try to sell it to the next guy. So, when I seen that I said I, I did try one coke and it did not even taste close to the coke that you buy in the United States, so I refrained from that.

Nelson: Did you have adequate supplies over there?

Kohlmeier: Yes, always had plenty of supplies, we just could never get another volley ball, other than that we had plenty of supplies.

Nelson: Were you ever concerned for your physical safety over there?

Kohlmeier: Never, never. You know what, when I went over there, I made the mistake of saying to my mom I'd probably come back in a wooden box, big mistake. I wasn't even serious when I said it. Obviously, she took it very seriously. The whole time I was over there I never even thought about getting shot, never thought about getting killed. It was, I would say most of the guys felt the same way.

Nelson: Ever felt any pressure or stress being in a combat zone?

Kohlmeier: No, never. I was a Christian, I prayed a lot and I trusted in the Lord, and I guess I could say that was my biggest security.

Nelson: I was going to ask you if you did anything, that you did something for good luck, but you had an abiding faith in the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Kohlmeier: It was a good experience when I went in the service because that was the first time, I was born and raised as Catholic. My parents always enforced Catholic religion on me, and that was the first time I really got away from it, and I said, "No, is this what I want?" I constantly started going to daily mass over in Vietnam, and in Vietnam the mass was held just in a dirt pit, and preacher is at the top of the pit. My faith increased, it was a huge leap in my faith when I was over in Vietnam and in service in general, but especially in Vietnam.

Nelson: What did your company personnel do for recreation over there?

Kohlmeier: We played horseshoes, we also, like I said, played volleyball, here's a picture of us playing volleyball until the ball broke, and we played it quite a few months, and we always had a large group out there playing. I was really sad when they couldn't get another volleyball for us. Then we also played basketball, I was not a basketball player, but there was a number of them that did play basketball. We also went swimming, in fact, my group of guys that worked with me on putting up the barracks, I was pretty liberal so I let them go swimming at noontime every day. Well, the captain didn't like this and he kind of frowned on it, but he knew I cut his hair, also, for free, so he couldn't say too much, otherwise I would have said I ain't cutting your hair anymore. I did cut the guys' hair. And, another thing is, some of them went to the Vietnamese to get their hair cut, and I really wasn't for that myself. I always cut my own hair while I was over there, you can tell, my hair was always very short, except for the last four months I let it grow. But, I actually took the clippers and cut it straight down to my scalp every time. We didn't have electric clippers over there, it was a hand-held clippers that you had to squeeze like a scissors. I eventually wore it out because I cut so much hair over there, and once it wore out they couldn't get me another one so I, it was over the last month anyway so I ceased to cut hair over there. But the other choice was to go to the Vietnamese and you really didn't want to there because, like I said, you didn't know if they were friend or foe. They shaved around your ear with a straight razor, and they could have sliced your throat any time they wanted to when they worked around you, and that was a scary situation so I never went to a Vietnamese for a haircut, and consequently I cut most everybody in the company's hair, everybody pretty much came to me for a hair cut.

Nelson: Did you charge?

Kohlmeier: I didn't charge, they once in awhile threw a tip in into my money box where I sold beer and soda, and once in awhile threw a tip in there, and I left it go because to make up for the shortages of beer or sodas.

Nelson: Did you ever have the opportunity to attend any USO shows? Bob Hope was over there and Ann Margaret and you'd see on TV that these folks were over there entertaining the troops, and I find it difficult to believe that they didn't come by you.

Kohlmeier: We didn't even hear about them in our area I suppose because we were in kind of a little bit safer area, I don't know they, never heard about them, never went to one. In fact we could take an R&R, which was a rest and recuperation time, but I never even took that the whole time I was over there. You could go to Japan, you could go back to Cam Ranh Bay for a rest period.

Nelson: So, you took no travel or leave while you were over there?

Kohlmeier: No, I never took any time off. I did get days off once in awhile, you almost had to ask for them. Some of the guys, about every other week you got a day off.

Nelson: We're talking about rest and recuperation here, and what they did for recreation, tell me about Tin City and what it was.

Kohlmeier: Here is a picture of it here, it was small buildings. I think they guys named it Tin City because most of these little buildings were made out of tin or, I shouldn't say tin, it was actually steel. The roofs were made out of corrugated steel. All it was was the front was a small bar, in the back there were just beds, and the women would actually serve you the beer up front and the guys participated in going in the back with these women and sleeping with them. Some of them stayed all night long. The government provided a truck that would actually, on your days off, I actually drove the truck for a few days which was another one of my jobs, I dropped the guys off and then in the morning I would come back and picked them up if they stayed all night, otherwise it was you'd drop them off in the morning and pick them up at night. There was two trips were made.

Nelson: The company commander and the first sergeant knew about this and it was okay with them?

Kohlmeier: Yes, and according to what they were telling us those women were checked out once a month to make sure they didn't have venereal diseases, and so therefore these guys participated in this. But, a lot of guys came back with venereal diseases, and they were being constantly checked and warned not to go back and whatever. I don't know where they going, though, they could have been going to other areas or other women that weren't checked out. I don't know.

Nelson: Can you read what it says on that establishment there, it says "Hotel Green, Restaurant, (inaudible) Bar". You said there was a restaurant up front and beds and such in back.

Kohlmeier: Yep, that's all it was, it was kind of by itself. It was somewhat near (inaudible), but it was by itself, this little Tin City.

Nelson: When did you leave Vietnam?

Kohlmeier: I left August of '67.

Nelson: Your entire company left, right?

Kohlmeier: Right.

Nelson: How did you feel about leaving Vietnam for home?

Kohlmeier: We were definitely all excited. We were joking around, a very gayful time because we knew we were getting out.

Nelson: Did you get a short timer's attitude?

Kohlmeier: Yes. Everybody was kidding everybody about being short time and short. It was a very nice time, a joyful time then over there, of course the whole time I enjoyed it over there.

Nelson: How did you get home from Vietnam?

Kohlmeier: We traveled by, we flew out of Cam Ranh Bay by a small prop plane. This is Cam Ranh Bay here is where we were waiting to get on the plane, we flew out of Cam Ranh Bay. Oh, let me point out one thing, too, that when we were in line to actually leave, they were actually pulling some of the guys out of line that still had these venereal disease, and then they weren't laughing. They were very sad, they were crying in fact, because they said you can't go home until you're cured, and they'd pull them right out of line. The rest of us were excited about going home and felt bad for the ones that did get pulled out. We flew a small prop plane, and we flew into Japan, here, there's where we landed in Japan. We were not allowed to take pictures. They told us if you take pictures your camera will be taken away. I kind of snuck two pictures in. I said, ah, I'm going to take a chance, I guess I was (inaudible) beyond my age I guess, and I snapped this picture while we were waiting. Out of Japan we flew a large, commercial airline. It took us 13 hours to fly back. We landed here in the State of Washington.

Nelson: Is that McCord Air Force Base?

Kohlmeier: McCord Air Force Base, yes. Many of the guys actually kissed the ground when we got back because they were so excited about getting back. Here they gave us new, Class A dress uniforms to go home in.

Nelson: Now, this isn't Fort McCord, this they marched you over to Fort Lewis, the Army base there.

Kohlmeier: That's right, we transferred over to Fort Lewis, and that's where they gave us these Class A uniforms, they did all the paperwork to process us out. We were here two days or so. Here's where we were actually getting the processing done. They transferred us over to inactive duty.

Nelson: You went right into the reserves right at this location here, they transferred you into the reserves there.

Kohlmeier: Right.

Nelson: Did you send any souvenirs home?

Kohlmeier: Yes, I did. We actually packed up, the souvenirs were still in Vietnam. We packed them in they were like small, wooden crates, they were almost like a small coffin. We packed a lot of souvenirs that we bought, most of our clothing, anything (inaudible), you actually came back with a very small bag of things on the plane coming back, and we actually nailed these boxes up and they sent them back separately, so they said you'll get them two weeks after you're home if you get them, so we were (inaudible) they wouldn't show up, mine did show up and I had things in it, they weren't even broken. They things were in good shape when I got it.

Nelson: Did you know of any people that sent home any contraband from Vietnam?

Kohlmeier: No, I do not.

Nelson: By contraband I mean weapons, or firearms, AK47s.

Kohlmeier: They could have, there were guys that were talking about it, I don't know of any personally, because you could have put anything in these boxes. No one really checked out what you put in them.

Nelson: When you arrived home did you find a job or go back to school, or what did you do?

Kohlmeier: I started at a local discount store. I applied for a job there and I started out as stockman for a couple of weeks and then they promoted me to...

Nelson: Do you remember the name of that store?

Kohlmeier: Yeah, (inaudible) Department Store.

Nelson: That was down South Sheridan Road?

Kohlmeier: South Sheridan Road, yes, and they promoted me to a department manager, and consequently I ended up being manager of almost every department in the store, and eventually I became assistant store manager, and eventually took over the store. I was the manager of the store.

Nelson: Did you also go back to school?

Kohlmeier: Yes, I went back to school to Gateway because when I first started at this retail market I thought retail market is okay, and I thought I'd try it out and I went back to Gateway for two years straight. The government, of course, I was making money through the government GI Bill, and they paid me so much a month to go back to school. They paid for my books as long as I kept my grades up a certain grade average. I took advantage of that. I went to school for two years and stayed with retailing. Prior to going into the service I worked for McDonald's, I was a manager of a McDonald's, and they called me for five years after I got out of the service to come back to them. I didn't want to go back to fast food.

Nelson: What McDonald's did you work at here in town?

Kohlmeier: I started out at the one on South Sheridan Road, and I ended up when they first opened the one on 52nd Street I was the first manager there. That was in 1965 just before I went in the service, I was the manager of that one. I was 19 years old.

Nelson: Did you join any veteran's organizations?

Kohlmeier: No, I never got into any of those.

Nelson: What did you go on to do as a career after returning from the war.

Kohlmeier: Well, like I said, I went into this retailing, then when the company I worked for folded after nine years. So, then I took a break from full-time job and I kind of took part-time jobs for awhile. I installed carpeting for awhile, I worked at an auto parts place for a little bit. Then I met my wife whom I'm married to, and she worked for (inaudible) Nelson contractor and her dad hired me and I've been now there for 25 years.

Nelson: Did your military experience influence your thinking about the Vietnam War or the military in general?

Kohlmeier: Yeah, it did. I thought it was a little bit of a waste of time when we were over there because we didn't know who we were fighting. They took advantage of us in a lot of ways. They begged for food from us constantly and different things. I thought it

was a little bit of a waste of time that we were over there, the people didn't seem to appreciate that we were there and different things.

Nelson: Do you attend any military reunions?

Kohlmeier: No, I do not.

Nelson: How did your service and experience affect your life?

Kohlmeier: It affected my life it deepened my religion, my faith. Actually it was a big help because when I went in service, I was actually glad when I got drafted at the time. I was going through my teenage years and I was not getting along real well with my dad, and even my girlfriend we were having our little spats, and on my job at McDonald's I was getting a little tired of it, so, actually I probably one of the few guys that jumped for joy when I got my draft notice. When I went in the service, it really helped me straighten out, I learned to detach myself from things because I knew the Army was taking care of me for two years so I didn't have to worry about a lot of things. I had trouble even sleeping at night before I went in service. Once I got in service I slept like a rock, I had no trouble, and ever since I've been out of service, it really helped me straighten out my thinking in a lot of ways.

Nelson: Would you recommend military life for your two sons?

Kohlmeier: I would leave it up to them. Military experience was an excellent one for me, I would recommend it for certain people, definitely. I was the type of person that didn't know really what they wanted to do out of life, so I was a good experience, many people know exactly what they want to do coming right out of high school or even younger, for that matter. I still don't know what I want to do, I'm 58 years old and I'm still trying different things.

Nelson: In closing, I want to bring your attention to the shadow box that you have here. I want you to tell me what awards that you earned while you were in the service.

Kohlmeier: The one to the far left are the Good Conduct medal, the next one going to the right is the National Defense Service medal, the next one over, the yellow one, is the Vietnam Service Medal with two bronze service stars, the next one over is the Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal awarded by the Republic of Vietnam, the one right above that one is the sharpshooter badge with rifle and machine gun bars, and the one to the left,

that one is a driver/mechanics badge with driver double bar below that. The thing right above my picture there is my dog tags.

Nelson: That's your original dog tags?

Kohlmeier: Yeah, and just to the right of that is your Spec 4 badge that you wore on your shirt.

Nelson: That's your original, military, ID card there, too.

Kohlmeier: Yes, down in the right-hand, lower corner is my military ID card which you were supposed to turn in when you get out of service, but I had lost mine, and then I had another one made up, then I found my original one, well, this is my original one here. And, you had to hand in one, like I said, hand in one at the end of your service tour, so I was glad to have one.

Nelson: Well, we're getting toward the end. Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered in this interview?

Kohlmeier: No.

Nelson: All right. I want to thank you for consenting to do this interview and for contributing your experiences to the Veterans History Project. I also want to thank you for your service to our country.